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Author(s): Miller, Julie Ann

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How nuclear weapons tests were named

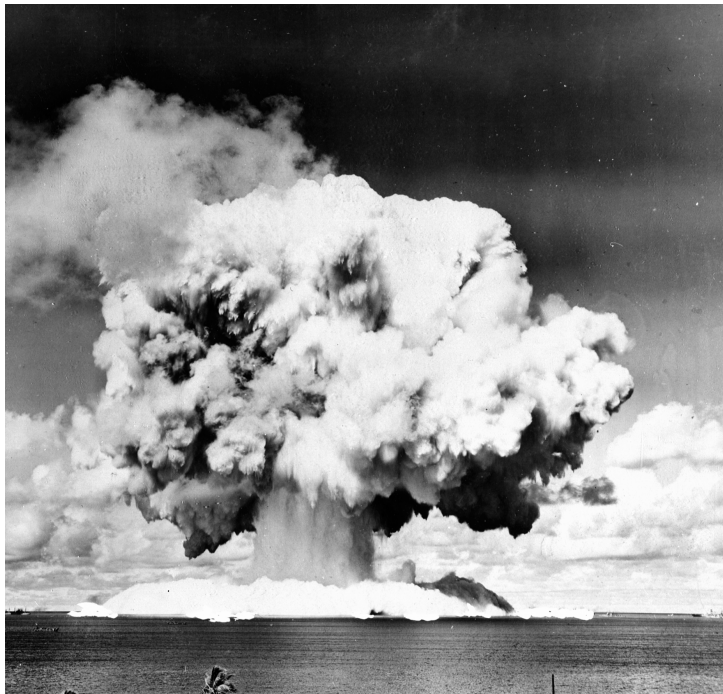
By Julie Miller, Librarian-Archivist, [National Security Research Center](#)

What do Galileo, Husky Pup, Turquoise and Barracuda have in common? They are names of nuclear weapons tests conducted at what is now called the Nevada National Security Site (NNSS). Over 1,000 U.S. nuclear tests were conducted at various sites between 1945 and 1992, and each of the tests was inaugurated with a name, as documented in the Lab's vast weapons test collections housed in the National Security Research Center (NSRC).

To protect the classified information about nuclear weapons and maintain security, nuclear weapons tests were assigned names. This has been true from the beginning with Trinity, the [first atomic bomb test](#) in 1945. Lab Director J. Robert Oppenheimer later said the test name may have been inspired by his [love of poetry](#).

Test names

Weapons tests were named differently depending on which government organization sponsored the test. Initial test names came from the Joint Army/Navy Phonetic Alphabet, which was developed in 1941 and used by all branches of the U.S. military to improve radio communications.



Caption: The Able test was the first weapons test following the combat deployment of the Little Boy and Fat Man atomic bombs. After the Los Alamos-created atomic bombs helped [end World War II](#), the no-longer-secret Lab transitioned into an era of weapons testing.

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It was referred to as the Able Baker alphabet:

Able, Baker, Charlie, Dog, Easy, Fox, George, How, Item, Jig, King, Love, Mike, Nan, Oboe, Peter, Queen, Roger, Sugar, Tare, Uncle, Victor, William, X-ray, Yoke, Zebra

As the United States, and in particular the Lab (then called Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory), entered into a post-World War II testing period, weapons tests were named in alphabetical order for each operation series, beginning with the Crossroads Able test on July 1, 1946 at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific.



Caption: The Galileo test on September 2, 1957 was part of the Operation Plumbbob series.

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After about 1952, the Able Baker alphabet was no longer used in order to avoid duplication of test names. New names from a variety of inspirations were picked each year, including

- famous scientists' names: Newton, Galileo, Pascal
- colors: Purple, Chartreuse, Sienna
- sailing terms: Jib, Mast, Keel
- birds: Wagtail, Merlin, Tern

Since about 1973, the 112 tests co-sponsored by the Department of Defense (DoD) were named by the Code Word, Nickname and Exercise Term system called NICKA. The NICKA formula for a test moniker required a two-word name in which the first two letters of the first word were preassigned to various DoD agencies. For example, the DoD's letters were Di, Hu, Hy and Mi. The first letter of the second word was alphabetical. For example, the first test had the second word start with "A," then the second with "B" and so on. As such, the DoD-sponsored tests had names like Diamond Ace, Husky Pup, Hybla Gold and Minty Delight.

According to publications from the DoD, Department of Energy (DOE) and their predecessor organizations, they sponsored weapons tests for 46 years. The purpose of the tests were to advance weapon design, determine weapons effects or to verify weapon safety. Though the overall weapons testing program was collaborative it was ultimately overseen by the president of the United States.

Meanwhile, the DOE did not have a formal naming system like the DoD. The national laboratories chose the names. Often, a test series contained test names that were categorically related, meaning names of things having shared characteristics such as New Mexico county names (Socorro, Rio Arriba, De Baca) and fish species (Tuna, Bonefish, Pike).

Ron Cosimi remembers

Retired Los Alamos Test Director from 1988 to 1998, Ron Cosimi, chose names for tests sponsored by the Lab during that time.

"If [the Lab] was planning to run 10 tests in a fiscal year, I would choose 10 names of Texas cities, for example," Cosimi said, including Abilene, Laredo and Waco, adding that this was his favorite category because he enjoyed creating logos for the Texas city names. "I named about 30 tests and experiments and was responsible for about 100 logos for tests."

Most tests did not have a patch or logo until about 1981. "I think the earliest patch/logo appeared on Clairette," Cosimi said, adding, "As early as 1969, I was having a logo painted on each [testing] tower that I worked on."



Caption: Test shot logo patch for the Vaughn test conducted on March 15, 1985, which was part of the Operation Grenadier series of tests.

“Camaraderie is the No. 1 reason I supported the practice [of creating patches and logos],” Cosimi said. “There always was an interschool rivalry between the labs at NTS [Nevada Test Site] and the teams from Los Alamos proudly wore their caps with the event they were working on.”



Caption: The Ice Cap test was never conducted. It was a joint underground test between the United Kingdom and Los Alamos National Laboratory. Preparations came to a halt when President George Bush signed a temporary and unilateral moratorium on underground testing of nuclear weapons on October 3, 1992.

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In addition to the dozens of logos and patches that are part of the NSRC's collections, "the Atomic Testing Museum in Las Vegas, Nevada, probably has most of the patches/logos," Cosimi said. Cosimi and others have donated patches there.

"I enjoyed picking names since that gave me a chance to indulge in my creative side when I had to come up with a logo. Sometimes we ran out of names when additional tests were added, then I would choose previously unused names," Cosimi said, pointing to the 1992 Divider test, the name of which came from an old category of tools and implements.

"After I retired," Cosimi said, "my successors used movie names and then branched off into many names, randomly chosen – even some names of family members."



Caption: Retired LANL Test Director Ron Cosimi's jacket and hats showing test logos. Logos were designed for many tests and made into patches that could be applied to jackets and hats. (Photo courtesy of Ron Cosimi.)

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John Hopkins remembers

"The Lab's Testing (J) Division was responsible for Lab-sponsored nuclear tests and this included the selection of their names," said **John Hopkins**, who worked at the Lab beginning in 1960 as a nuclear physicist and retired as the associate director responsible for the nuclear weapons program 34 years later.

Hopkins remarked that, often, members of J-Division would volunteer a list of names. When Hopkins was the division leader, he submitted his then-teenage daughter Anna's proposed list of games of skill and chance to the DOE Division of Military Applications in Washington, D.C., for approval as test name suggestions. The list included Rummy, Chess and Baseball. They were accepted and appeared in the late '70s and early '80s. Hopkins participated in 170 nuclear tests, including five atmospheric tests, during his career.

Byron Ristvet remembers

At one time, there was a "Name a nuke" suggestion box in the Albuquerque DNA facility hallway, recalled Byron Ristvet, a retired DoD scientist. The "Name a nuke" suggestion box provided the starting preassigned and alphabetical letters to be used for an upcoming test.

"Some of the suggestions were actually used for tests," Ristvet said.



Caption: Patches with logos were designed for several tests. (Image courtesy of Ron Cosimi.)

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Tom Kunkle remembers

Retired Weapons Scientist Tom Kunkle recalls one test that was named twice.

“The initial nickname for the 24 September 1981 test was ‘Craps,’ a name from the list of games of skill and chance from Anna Hopkins. The nickname was [deemed] unacceptable. The powers that be didn’t want us [shooting] craps at the test site,” said Kunkle. “So the test was renamed to Cernada [little cinder] from the most-recent list of New Mexico place names. I hoped at the time that someone in Russia wasted a lot of brain sugar wondering if the nickname had anything to do with the nuclear device.”

Stories and photos on the nuclear weapon tests are part of the National Security Research Center, which houses LANL’s classified and unclassified materials from our weapons testing history.

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